

Forest officials want to add treatment acres

2014 farm bill gives agency latitude to combat invasive species, fuel buildup

By ERIC BARKER of the Tribune
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Officials on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest are seeking to greatly expand the number of acres designated as priorities for treatment of insect and disease infestations and fire danger.

Forest Supervisor Cheryl Probert is requesting 2.1 million acres be added to the more than 420,000 acres that Idaho Gov. "C.L." Butch Otter requested for the special designation two years ago.

A provision of the 2014 farm bill gives the Forest Service more flexibility to design and implement treatment projects like logging and prescribed burning in areas where bugs like Western pine beetles or diseases like root rot have killed vast swaths of forest - or invasive plants like spotted knapweed have edged out native plants, and the buildup of fuels threaten to unleash unusually large and damaging fires. The legislation tasks the agency to work with collaborative groups to plan and implement treatment projects for the problem areas.

When it first passed, the Farm Bill gave state governors 60 days to request designations. Otter and national forest officials in Idaho concentrated the first phase of priority-area designations in places where project planning already had begun. Another provision of the bill allows the secretary of agriculture to make follow-up designations. Probert said foresters have had more time to make the designations in the second phase and have pored over insect and disease reports and teamed with the agency's fire preventions officers to do so.

"We worked with the entomologist and the forest health protection unit and our fire folks to look at not just the most recent annual maps but look across the forest where we have insect and disease issues and it's really easier to show the areas we don't have them than where we do," she said.

Since the 2.1 million-acre proposed addition was done on a watershed scale, Probert said much of the area will not be eligible for some forms of treatment. The agency didn't exclude wilderness and roadless areas even though mechanical treatments and commercial timber sales are not allowed in those places.

The priority designation allows Forest Service officials to use expedited processes for preparing and implementing treatment. For instance, on projects less than 3,000 acres in size that are deemed to have little environmental impact, the agency can use what is known as categorical exclusions. The designation allows officials to skip the normally lengthy documentation required by the National Environmental Policy Act and prevents critics from filing administrative objections.

In other projects that are either larger or pose more environmental risk, such as those with habitat for threatened steelhead or bull trout, the agency can perform the analysis with fewer alternatives than normally required. However, agency officials must work with collaborative groups, such as the Clearwater Basin Collaborative, to develop and design the projects.

Jonathan Oppenheimer of the Idaho Conservation League at Boise said the priority designations can be a useful tool for foresters that helps them address problems such as the build-up of hazardous fuels close to rural communities. But he balked at the plan to designate vast areas of forest, saying it waters down the intent of the program.

"If you just say everything is a priority than nothing is a priority," he said. "There is a need to be a little bit more methodical in terms of prioritizing the specific areas where there is a demonstrated need instead of just painting with a broad brush."

Gary Macfarlane of the Friends of the Clearwater at Moscow said he fears the agency is seeking to dramatically increase logging and road building to levels not seen since the 1980s. Instead, he said the agency should look to fix problems caused by past logging.

"They are not meeting their forest plan standards for water quality and fish habitat. I think going in this direction is going to take them on the wrong path toward meeting their obligations to the public and the resources."

Probert countered that nothing in the law allows the agency to bypass environmental laws like the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. Because the law requires the involvement of collaborative groups, she said the public will have more opportunity to help shape any projects that arise out of the designations.

"From my perspective, it's really just another tool in our tool box and can be available where appropriate to address those serious forest health concerns that Congress, state, local stakeholders - a lot of people - are concerned about and want us to accelerate the pace at which we address those issues."

Barker may be contacted at ebarker@lmtribune.com or at (208) 848-2273. Follow him on Twitter @ezebarker.